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# INTERFERENCE STRATEGIES

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# Interference Strategies

BOOK EDITORS

**LANFRANCO ACETI & PAUL THOMAS**

EDITORIAL MANAGER

**ÇAĞLAR ÇETİN**

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# Interference Strategies: Is Art in the Middle?

If we look at the etymological structure of the word **interference**, we would have to go back to a construction that defines it as a sum of the two Latin words *inter* (in between) and *ferio* (to strike), but with a particular attention to the meaning of the word *ferio* being interpreted principally as *to wound*. Although perhaps etymologically incorrect, it may be preferable to think of the word *interference* as a composite of *inter* (in between) and the Latin verb *fero* (to carry), which would bring forward the idea of *interference* as a contribution brought in the middle of two arguments, two ideas, two constructions.

It is important to acknowledge the etymological root of a word not in order to devalue or strike academic exercise, but in order to clarify the ideological underpinnings of arguments that are thematically and characteristically defined by a word.

This book, titled *Interference Strategies*, does not (and in all honesty could not) provide a resolution to a complex interaction—that of artistic interference—that has a complex historical tradition. In fact, it is impossible, for me, when analyzing the issue of interference, not to think of the Brechtian *Maker* (also known as *Daniela Wolferra*) and the coverings that the painter followed in 1959 on commission from Pope Paul VI to ‘render decent’ the naked bodies of Michelangelo to Buonarroti’s fresco in the Sistine Chapel. That act, in the eyes of a contemporary viewer, was a wound inflicted in between the relationship created by the artwork and the artist with the viewer (*intentional*).

*interferentia* is a word that assembles a multitude of meanings interpreted according to one’s perspective and ideological construction, a disturbance, and an alteration of modalities of interaction between two parties. In this book, there are a series of representations of these interferences, as well as a series of questions on what are the possible contemporary forms of interference—digital, scientific and aesthetic—and what are the strategies that could be adopted in order to actively interfere.

The complexity of the strategies of interference within contemporary political and aesthetic discourses appears to be summed up by the perception that interference is an necessarily active gesture. This perception appears to exclude the fact that sometimes the very existence of an artwork is based on an interfering nature, or on an aesthetic that has come to be as non-conscious to and, hence, interfering with a political project.

Interfering artworks, which by their own nature challenge a system, were the artworks chosen for the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (1937). The cultural and ideological underpinnings of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party could solely provide an understanding of aesthetic that would necessarily imply the defini-

tion of ‘degenerate art’ produced by ‘degenerate artists’. That was not addressed by the grandeur of Germany could not be seen by the Nazi regime as anything else but ‘interfering and hence degenerate,’ since it questioned and interfered with the ideal purity of Teutonic representations, which were endorsed and promoted as the only aesthetic of the National Socialist party. Wilhelm Heinrich Otto Dix’s *War Cripples* (1920) could not be a more critical painting of the Body Politic of the time, and of war in general, and therefore had to be classified as ‘degenerate’ and condemned to be ‘burnt.’

Art in this context cannot be and should not be anything else but interference, either by bringing something in between or by wounding the Body Politic by placing something in between the perfectly constructed rational madness of humanity and the subjugated viewer. A statement that in interference, obstructs and disrupts the carefully annotated and carefully choreographed itinerary that the viewers should be expected to follow. In this case interference is something that corrupts, degenerates and threatens to collapse the vision of the Body Politic.

In thinking about the validity of interference as a strategy, it was impossible not to revisit and compare the image of Paul J. Goebbels viewing the *Entartete Kunst* (*Degenerate Art*) exhibition to the many images of pompously sitting corporate CEOs and billionaires in museums and art fairs around the globe, gleaning with pride over the propaganda, or—better—over the Brechtian fact that they have commissioned artists to produce.

Today’s contemporary art should be interfering more and more with art itself, it should be corrupted and corrupting, degenerate and degenerating. It should be producing what currently it is not and it should create a wound within art itself, able to alter current thinking

and modalities of engagement. It should be—to quote Pablo Picasso—a instrument of war able to *interferir*: “No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.”

If art should be a strike or bring something apart of what has been a long aesthetic conversation that preceded the Avant-garde movement or the destructive fury of the early futurists. In this particular volume the issue of art as interference and the strategies that it should adopt have been reframed within the structures of contemporary technology as well as within the framework of interactions between art, science and media.

What sort of interference should be chosen, if one at all, remains a personal choice for each artist, curator, critic and historian.

If I had to choose, personally I find myself increasingly favoring art that does not deliver what is expected, what is obvious, what can be hung on a wall and can be made to tapestries. Nor can I find myself able to favor art that should propagate or business under a veil with the name of art repeatedly written in capital letters all over it. That does not leave very much choice in a world where interference is not longer acceptable, or if it is acceptable, it is so only within pre-established contractual cooperative frameworks, therefore losing its ‘interference value.’

This leaves the great conundrum—can interference still possible? There are still spaces and opportunities for interference, and this volume is one of these remaining areas, but they are interesting spaces and are shrinking fast, leaving a overwhelming Bauhausian descent produced by the conspirators of art and made of a multitude of distress.

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and *intentio auctoris* with *intentio lectoris*), as Umberto Eco would put it. Those famous breeches appear to be both: a form of censorship as well as interference with Michelangelo's vision.

Interference is a word that assembles a multitude of meanings interpreted according to one's perspective and ideological constructs as a meddling, a disturbance, and an alteration of modalities of interaction between two parties. In this book, there are a series of representations of these interferences, as well as a series of questions on what are the possible contemporary forms of interference - digital, scientific and aesthetic - and what are the strategies that could be adopted in order to actively interfere.

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If art should either strike or bring something is part of what has been a long aesthetic conversation that preceded the Avant-garde movement or the destructive fury of the early Futurists. In this particular volume the issue of art as interference and the strategies that it should adopt have been reframed within the structures of contemporary technology as well as within the frameworks of interactions between art, science and media.

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In this introduction I cannot touch upon all the different aspects of interference analyzed, like in the case of data and waves presented by Adam Nash, who argues that the digital is in itself and *per se* a form of interference: at least a form of interference with behavioral systems and with what can be defined as the illusory realm of everyday's 'real.'

Transversal interference, as in the case of Anna Munster, is a socio-political divide where heterogeneity is the monster, the wound, the interfering and dreaded element that threatens the 'homologation' of scientific thought.

With Brogan Bunt comes obfuscation as a form of blurring that interferes with the ordered lines of neatly defined social taxonomies; within which I can only perceive the role of the thinker as that of the taxidermist operating on living fields of study that are in the process of being rendered dead and obfuscated by the very process and people who should be unveiling and revealing them.

With Darren Tofts and Lisa Gye it is the perusal of the image that can be an act of interference and a disruption if it operates outside rigid interpretative frameworks and interaction parameters firmly set via *intentio operis*, *intentio auctoris* and *intentio lectoris*.

It is the fear of the unexpected remix and mash-up that interferes with and threatens the 'purity' and sanctimonious fascistic interpretations of the aura of the artwork, its buyers, consumers and aesthetic priests. The orthodoxical, fanatic and terroristic aesthetic hierarchies that were disrupted by laughter in the Middle Ages might be disrupted today by viral, amorphological and uncontrollable bodily functions.

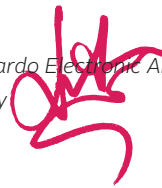
My very personal thanks go to Paul Thomas and the authors in this book who have endeavored to comply

with our guidelines to deliver a new milestone in the history of LEA.

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**Lanfranco Aceti**

*Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac*  
*Director, Kasa Gallery*



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# Interference Strategies

The theme of 'interference strategies for art' reflects a literal merging of sources, an interplay between factors, and acts as a metaphor for the interaction of art and science, the essence of transdisciplinary study. The revealing of metaphors for interference "that equates different and even 'incommensurable' concepts can, therefore, be a very fruitful source of insight." <sup>1</sup>

The role of the publication, as a vehicle to promote and encourage transdisciplinary research, is to question what fine art image-making is contributing to the current discourse on images. The publication brings together researchers, artists and cultural thinkers to speculate, contest and share their thoughts on the strategies for interference, at the intersection between art, science and culture, that form new dialogues.

In October 1927 the Fifth Solvay International Conference marked a point in time that created a unifying seepage between art and science and opened the gateway to uncertainty and therefore the parallels of artistic and scientific research. This famous conference announced the genesis of quantum theory and, with that, Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. These events are linked historically and inform interesting experimental art practices to reveal the subtle shift that can ensue from a moment in time.

The simple yet highly developed double slit experiment identifies the problem of measurement in the quantum world. If you are measuring the position of a particle

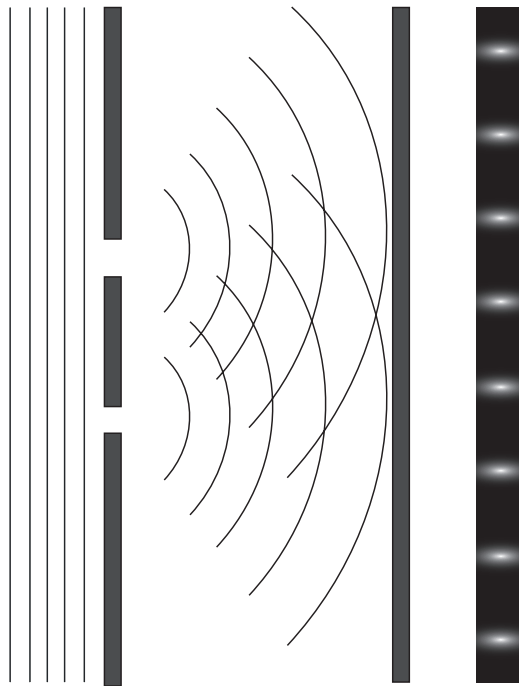
you cannot measure its momentum. This is one of the main theories that have been constantly tested and still remains persistent. The double slit experiment, first initiated by Thomas Young, exposes a quintessential quantum phenomenon, which, through Heisenberg theory, demonstrates the quantum universe as a series of probabilities that enabled the Newtonian view of the world to be seriously challenged.

*If the measurement intra-action plays a constitutive role in what is measured, then it matters how something is explored. In fact, this is born out empirically in experiments with matter (and energy): when electrons (or light) are measured using one kind of apparatus, they are waves; if they are measured in a complementary way, they are particles. Notice that what we're talking about here is not simply some object reacting differently to different probings but being differently.* <sup>2</sup>

In the double slit experiment particles that travel through the slits interfere with themselves enabling each particle to create a wave-like interference pattern.

The underlying concepts upon which this publication is based see the potential for art to interfere, affect and obstruct in order to question what is indefinable.

This can only be demonstrated by a closer look at the double slit experiment and the art that is revealed through phenomena of improbability.



**Figure 1.** Diagram of the double slit experiment that was first performed by Thomas Young in the early 1800's displays the probabilistic characteristics of quantum mechanical phenomena.

When particles go through the slits they act as waves and create the famous interference pattern. The concept is that one particle going through the slit must behave like a wave and interfere with itself to create the band image on the rear receptor.

Interference Strategies looks at the phenomenon of interference and places art at the very centre of the wave/particle dilemma. Can art still find a way in today's dense world where we are saturated with images from all disciplines, whether it's the creation of 'beautiful visualisations' for science, the torrent of images uploaded to social media services like Instagram and Flickr, or the billions of queries made to vast visual data archives such as Google Images? The contemporary machinic interpretations of the visual and sensorial experience of the world are producing a new spectacle of media pollution, obliging the viewers to ask if machines should be considered the new artists of the 21st century.

The notion of 'Interference' is posed here as an antagonism between production and seduction, as a

redirection of affect, or as an untapped potential for repositioning artistic critique. Maybe art doesn't have to work as a wave that displaces or reinforces the standardized protocols of data/messages, but can instead function as a signal that disrupts and challenges perceptions.

'Interference' can stand as a mediating incantation that might create a layer between the constructed image of the 'everyday' given to us by science, technological social networks and the means of its construction. Mediation, as discussed in the first Transdisciplinary Imaging conference, is a concept that has become a medium in itself through which we think and act; and in which we swim. Interference, however, confronts the flow, challenges currents and eulogizes the drift.

The questions posed in this volume, include whether art can interfere with the chaotic storms of data visualization and information processing, or is it merely reinforcing the noxious nature of contemporary media? Can we think of 'interference' as a key tactic for the contemporary image in disrupting and critiquing the continual flood of constructed imagery? Are contemporary forms and strategies of interference the same as historical ones? What kinds of similarities and differences exist?

Application of a process to a medium, or a wave to a particle, for example, the sorting of pixel data, literally interferes with the state of an image, and directly gives new materiality and meaning, allowing interference to be utilised as a conceptual framework for interpretation, and critical reflection.

Interference is not merely combining. Interference is an active process of negotiating between different forces. The artist in this context is a mediator, facilitating the meeting of competitive elements, bringing together and setting up a situation of probabilities.

In response to the questions posed by the conference theme, presentations traversed varied notions of interference in defining image space, the decoding and interpretation of images, the interference between different streams of digital data, and how this knowledge might redefine art and art practice. Within that scope lies the discourse about interference that arises when normal approaches or processes fail, with unanticipated results, the accidental discovery, and its potential in the development of new strategies of investigation.

In "[t]he case of Biophilia: a collective composition of goals and distributed action",<sup>3</sup> Mark Cypher highlights the interference in negotiations between exhibit organisers, and space requirements, and the requirements for artist/artworks, resulting in an outcome that is a combination generated by the competition of two or more interests. As part of the final appearance of *Biophilia*, the artwork itself contained elements of both interests, an interference of competing interests, comprising a system in which the artist and the artwork are components, and the display a negotiated outcome. Each element interferes with itself as it negotiates the many factors that contribute to the presentation of art. In this sense the creation of the final appearance of *Biophilia* is the result of the distributed action of many "actors" in a "network."<sup>4</sup> (To put this in another form all actors are particles and interact with each other to create all possible solutions but when observed, create a single state.)

In summing up concepts of the second Transdisciplinary Imaging conference, particularly in reference to the topic of interference strategies, Edward Colless spoke of some of the aspirations for the topic, entertaining the possibilities of transdisciplinary art as being a contested field, in that many of the conference papers were trying to unravel, contextualise and theorise simultaneously.

The publication aims to demonstrate a combined eclecticism and to extend the discussion by addressing the current state of the image through a multitude of lenses. Through the theme of interference strategies this publication will embrace error and transdisciplinarity as a new vision of how to think, theorize and critique the image, the real and thought itself.

**Paul Thomas**

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# Headless and Unborn, or the Baphomet Restored

Interfering with Bataille and Masson's Image of the *Acephale*

by

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## A MONSTROUS EMBLEM

At a certain period in European intellectual history, a comparatively large number of artists and intellectuals – arguably the most important thinkers and artists of the times – were all involved to a greater or lesser degree in the envisioning of a new myth that might lead European civilization out of the gathering darkness of fascism, a myth they hoped would provoke the total and radical transformation of society and culture.

Two principle groups were involved: the Surrealists, constellated around the ideas and political interventions of André Breton, the foremost ideologue of the Surrealist movement, and a group of 'dissident' surrealists that included Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris, key figures in the radical boys club, the *Collège de Sociologie*, which coalesced in 1936. Hovering between these two camps were a number of artists and intellectuals who appeared to loath to choose between the two encampments, or who periodically aligned themselves first with one, then the other. Overriding these vacillating allegiances and the petty clash of personalities was the unifying dream of finding a new myth through which society could

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates Bataille and Masson's drawing of the *Acephale*, the escutcheon of Bataille's esoteric cabal and the journal (*Acéphale*) that espoused his vision of a violently sacralised society. Masson's drawing of the acephalic monster is the emblem of Bataille's negative Absolute, and is therefore the *final image*, a talisman to wipe out all other images. I unearth a hitherto unsuspected connexion between the *Acephale* and a magical text, one of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*. Noting that the *Acephale* is an 'emblem', I point towards the tradition of the emblematic books, a tradition that began with Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*. I then propose that Caillois's 'objective ideograms' and the idea of mantic decaptitation was in part responsible for the production of Masson's image. Capitalising on these imaginal connexions, I conclude by re-imagining the image of the Baphomet, and in particular Eliphas Levi's famous drawing of the 'Goat of Mendes.' I suggest that the Baphomet is the secret twin of the *Acephale*, and that it is Levi's aim to make his Baphomet the ultimate hieroglyphic emblem, the supreme condensation of the mysteries of the occult tradition. Thus the Baphomet is the necessary occult complement to the headless monster of Bataille and Masson.

be transformed. This dream was at first principally fomented within two vectors of cultural intervention: the journal *Minotaure* and the political activities of a group of *engagés* known as *Contre-Attaque*.

*Minotaure* saw its first issue in 1933. The editorial philosophy of *Minotaure* was summed up by the publisher and editor in this way: "Starting from the fact that it

is impossible in our era to isolate the plastic arts from poetry and science, the review proposes to associate these three domains." Thus "the plastic arts, poetry, music, architecture, ethnology, mythology, spectacle, psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis" were all to be included within its pages in an effort to showcase "the most audacious intellectual activity of the day." In effect this was the reinvention of an experiment

that Georges Bataille had begun several years before with the publication of *Documents*, a journal that had sought provocation through a violent juxtaposition of ideas and images, the pages exploiting a paratactical arrangement of essays (on gnostic gems, ethnography, jazz, the big toe, and Buster Keaton, for example) and images from contemporary visual artists, photographs of slaughterhouses and pictures of African and Oceanic art. *Documents* appeared the year that *La Révolution surréaliste* ceased publication, Bataille no doubt hoping that it would symbolically represent a final, devastating salvo in Bataille's ongoing critique of Surrealism and of André Breton in particular.

Boiled down in the alembic of retrospection, we can see that what was primarily at stake in this drawn out intellectual contretemps between two heavy hitters was the nature and relevance of images, of representation itself. Breton was committed to the championing of the importance of images from the very first *Manifeste du Surréalisme* of 1924. Conversely, Bataille, by the early 1930s, seemed to be not so sure that images, art and literature had any relevance at all anymore. The rise of Fascism with its emphasis on spectacularity and the illusory fascination of imagery – what we might call today the rhetoric of the image – had led to a crisis of faith in representation itself.

Most of the usual suspects that had been associated with *Documents* had subsequently become associated with *Minotaure*. Soon *Minotaure* was effectively being edited by André Breton and his close friend Pierre Mabille, a surgeon, writer, scholar of alchemy and Haitian voodoo. *Minotaure* was a kind of high-rent 'neutral ground' where dissident Surrealists, existing Surrealists, ex-Dadaists and members of the (soon to be formed) *Collège* – primarily Bataille, Leiris, Patrick Waldberg and Caillois – all contributed. The title of the journal indexed one of the key mythologems around which many of the writers and artists constellated

their ideas in the divining of a new myth. In foreshadowing the lineaments of this future myth, they looked to the past, and the minotaur seething in the heart of its crepuscular labyrinth was one of the key players.

*Contre-Attaque* was a small group of revolutionary intellectuals who had provisionally banded together to present a double front: to aggressively denounce the ever-expanding threat of fascism, and to agitate for what they regarded as a concomitant radical transformation of society and culture. In April of 1936 Georges Bataille resigned from the group. This break with *Contre-Attaque* is doubly significant in that previous to this severing, Bataille's participation in the group represented a *rapprochement* between himself and André Breton, but it also signaled his violent frustration with the manner in which intellectuals had pursued their aims in the recent past. Bataille's solution to this perceived impasse was to create a secret society formed of like-minded *enragés*, all of whom were seemingly dedicated to following the hoof-prints of the minotaur *au fond du temple sacré*.

Directly following his break with *Contre-Attack*, Bataille traveled to the Spanish coastal town of Tossa de Mar to visit the on again/off again Surrealist artist André Masson, a friend and associate of both Bataille and Breton. It was good timing for a soul in tumult: the Spanish Civil War was just breaking out.

Holed up in Masson's kitchen, listening to a recording of *Don Juan*, Bataille witnessed Masson quickly produce a drawing that would become the escutcheon of Bataille's esoteric cabal and the exoteric journal (*Acéphale*) that would come to espouse his vision of a new, violently sacralised society. André Masson's drawing is the emblem of Bataille's radical break with *Contre-Attaque* and the pretensions of both *Minotaure* and the public face of the *Collège de Sociologie*. It is his 'rite du passage,' his initiation into another world.

The figure of the acephalic "monster" (as Bataille called it) is described by Masson in this manner:

*I saw him immediately as headless..but what to do with this cumbersome and doubting head? – Irresistibly it finds itself displaced in the sex, which it masks with a 'deaths head'.. Automatically one hand (the left!) flourishes a dagger, while the other kneads a blazing heart (a heart that does not belong to the Crucified, but to our master Dionysus).. The pectorals starred according to whim..(W)hat to make of the stomach? That empty container will be the receptacle for the Labyrinth that elsewhere had become our rallying sign. This drawing, made on the spot, under the eyes of Georges Bataille, had the good luck to please him. Absolutely.* <sup>2</sup>

*Absolutely* – not provisionally, not temporarily, not just for today, but forever, outside of space and time. I don't believe I am making too much of Masson's concluding statement here. It is inarguable that a great part of Bataille's mission in life was to define an Absolute that was the very inversion of the Absolute as previously, endlessly discussed in the West. Masson's drawing of the acephalic monster is the emblem of this negative Absolute, and of Bataille's quest. In his introductory essay in the first issue of the journal *Acéphale* Bataille is uncompromising in his rejection of the Absolute as conceived of in the past. What he is calling for is an *absolute rupture*:

*It is time to abandon the world of the civilized and its light. It is too late to countenance being reasonable and educated – which only leads to a life without appeal. Secretly or not, it is necessary to become totally Other or cease to be.* <sup>3</sup>

The last sentence is perhaps a snide reference to Breton's *Nadja* and its famous concluding line: "La beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas," and thus Ba-

taille levels his scimitar squarely at Breton and what Bataille considered Breton's barely sublimated yearning for the light. This light is that of the *intellectus*, the light which streams through the Western philosophical imaginary ever since Plato's philosopher first struggled out of the cave to apprehend the true sun. The light of the sun, the light of the world that had existed up until the appearance of the acephalic monster, is the manifestation in the phenomenal world of the light of the Absolute beyond it: civilization and its light are one. The Acephale signals an end to all that. An end to all the useless light, and an end to all images illuminated by the light.

The Acephale thus becomes a substitute god, a substitute for the Absolute. No more the light of god, no more the light of the image. Masson's emblematic Acephale is therefore the final image, the talisman that will wipe out all other images.

Furthermore the Acephale does not *represent* this totally Other world without light, it *invokes* it. The acephalic monster of Masson and Bataille is a talismanic, incantatory machine. Bataille's introduction in the first issue of the journal *Acéphale* is entitled *La Conjuration Sacrée*. There are several possible translations of this: Sacred Conspiracy, Sacred Confederacy, or Sacred Conjunction. All these meanings are possible and all, I would suggest, are *necessarily* present. It is the last possible meaning, sacred conjunction, that I want to run with here.

*The acephalic man mythologically expresses sovereignty committed to the destruction and death of God, and in this the identification with the headless man merges and melds with the identification with the superhuman, which is entirely 'the death of God.'* <sup>4</sup>

I will make no comment on the obvious Nietzschean aspirations here, it is the *identification* that Bataille emphasizes which I want to dilate upon now. Bataille's day job was as an archivist/paleographer/numismatist at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, and as such he had access to a large and prestigious collection of rare books and manuscripts. I suggest that among these recondite texts Bataille had discovered a particular text in the collection of Greco-Egyptian magical texts collectively known as the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*.

The *Papyri Graecae Magicae* were collected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by an enterprising and avaricious diplomat in Alexandria, shipped to Europe and subsequently sold to various libraries, including the British Museum and the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*. It has been hypothesised that these papyri were originally the collection of one man, a magician, "who was also a scholar, probably philosophically inclined, as well as a bibliophile and archivist concerned about the preservation of the material."<sup>5</sup>

A man, in other words, remarkably similar to Georges Bataille. His well-known interest in Gnosticism may have inclined him to search out similar material, and inevitably he would have come across the magical texts of the Greco-Egyptian magician.

If this seems far-fetched, one only has to remember that in the early 1930s in Paris, many of the foremost intellectuals and artists of the time – at least, those of the particular persuasions and allegiances of which I am writing – were regularly attending<sup>6</sup> the soirees of occultist Maria de Nagłowska, the self-styled "satanic woman" and hierarchess of the Order of the Golden Arrow.

André Breton, Man Ray and his friend the American adventurer William Seabrook regularly attended her

evenings of occult weirdness, and certainly Bataille would not have been outdone in this. It is quite possible that Nagłowska's demonstrations of magical rituals and her ideas on ritual practice were a direct inspiration behind Bataille's formation of his secret society of the Acephale. It is certainly true that Bataille seemed to be emulating Nagłowska when he attempted to drag his fellow *Acéphalists* into the depths of the forest...for ritual sacrifice.<sup>7</sup>

Amongst the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* there is one text that stands out from the standard magical spells that provide solutions for petty objectives, the spells for keeping a lover for example, or for getting bugs out of the house. This text is *Papyri Graecae Magicae* V. 96 – 172, named by its English translator as the "Stele of Jeu the Hieroglyphist."

The ritual begins in this way:

*I summon you, the Headless One, who created earth and heaven, who created night and day, / you, who created light and darkness; you are Osoronnophris whom none has ever seen..you have distinguished the just and the unjust; you have made female and male; / you have revealed seeds and fruits; you have made men love each other and hate each other.*<sup>8</sup>

The being that is summoned is explicitly named *Acephalos* (Ἀκέφαλος), the Headless One, in this ritual.<sup>9</sup> What makes this ritual even more unusual, unusual in terms of the entire Greco-Egyptian magical corpus in fact, is that after the standard banishing of demons from the ritual chamber, the magician invokes the "Holy Headless One" into himself, thus becoming the one who "makes the lightning flash and the thunder roll...the one whose mouth burns completely...the one who begets and destroys."<sup>10</sup>

Masson's emblem of the Acephale holds a flaming heart in its right hand, and the Headless daemon in the *Stele of Jeu the Hieroglyphist* says that its name is a "heart encircled with a serpent, come forth and follow." In his text *Sacred Conspiracy/Confederacy/Conjuration* Bataille writes:

*...he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. He is not a man. He is not a God either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.*<sup>11</sup>

A magician who has invoked a Headless daemon into himself is of course no longer a man and not a god, but something that is neither one nor the other. He is himself but more than himself. He is, in other words, an Acephalic monster, as Bataille avers in the above passage.

If all this seems circumstantial, I totally agree – yet this hitherto unsuspected connexion is certainly not unlikely, and moreover possesses a high degree of *imaginal logic*, if I may use the term. Allow me to proceed a little further in my interference with Masson and Bataille's Acephale.

I have consistently called this image an "emblem." I have done this in order to point towards a tradition in which I believe the Acephale is the final arrival. This is the tradition of the emblematic books, a tradition that was kick-started when the text of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* was purchased by Cosimo d'Medici from a Byzantine monk in 1422. The translation of this text (which was originally written, incidentally, in the same period as the texts of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*) caused as much an intellectual furor as Ficino's later translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Plato's

dialogues. The *Hieroglyphica* purported to explain ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs as emblematic figures containing layers of embedded meanings. The translation of the *Hieroglyphica* set in motion an entire industry that led to the production of hundreds of emblematic books, and possession of these collections was considered *de rigueur* by the learned in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the hands of a few dedicated publishers (such as Theodor de Bry, who published books by Robert Fludd and Michael Maier, both notable Hermeticists) the hieroglyphic and graphic tradition of the emblem developed into an efflorescence of Hermetic publishing, which would have a defining influence on alchemy:

*Allegorical images accompanied by a few cryptic lines of prose or verse, emblems presented to the learned a kind of pictorial riddle containing a solution of a moral nature. But emblems which could easily conceal more than one meaning constituted ideal vehicles for the secret transmission of esoteric information, and as such..were adopted by the alchemists.*<sup>12</sup>

Allegorical representation in the form of *personification* – an ingenious method of encapsulating an abstract idea in the form of a human figure – has probably the longest tradition in the history of Western culture. Emblematic personification was a method in which a host of interconnected, often difficult ideas were subsumed into the one, easily comprehensible image. Examples that are still with us today would include the personification of Justice as a blindfolded woman carrying a sword and a set of scales, and the medieval figure of Fortuna, a woman turning a giant wheel, the symbolism of which perhaps only survives through a certain television game show.

Considering that hermetic emblems were "allegorical images accompanied by a few cryptic lines of prose

or verse,” the cover of the first issue of *Acéphale* is a perfect example of such an emblem – an hieratic figure beneath which we can see a few cryptic lines: *The Sacred Confederacy, or Nietzsche Against the Fascists*. Indeed, I would insist that the form and function of this cover serves the very same purpose as the emblem in the hermetic and alchemical books, images the purpose of which is to accomplish much more than mere representation.

Masson and Bataille's figure of the *Acéphale* is also an emblem with a special purpose: it is a magical machine that begins the apocalyptic annihilation of images altogether.

As exactly the same figure was reproduced on the cover of the journal *Acéphale* in each successive issue (there were only three issues), and as only a single line of text on the cover changed with each successive issue (*The Sacred Confederacy, or Nietzsche Against the Fascists*, for example) – thus serving the function of an allegorical figure with a “few cryptic lines of prose” – one can say that this emblem was envisioned as belonging to that unchanging Other world of the sacral, standing outside of the pornography of images with which we are daily bombarded, and thus serving as the herald of the sacred darkness that would subsume all representations. A more recent agent provocateur, Jean Baudrillard, in describing a similar vision of violent iconoclasm, notes:

*Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication. We no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene.* <sup>13</sup>

If one additionally recalls Fredric Jameson's despair at the “pornography” of images which miscegenate around us at an astounding daily rate, then the figure of the *Acéphale* must be regarded as a daemonic buzzbomb sent to devastate the endless plain of representation.

### THE BAPHOMET RESTORED

*One kinde of Locust...stands...in a large erectnesse... by Zoographers called mantis.*  
– Sir T. Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, 1646.

These thoughts about Bataille and Masson's hieratic emblem can take a further speculative *détournement*. Following the momentum of my reasoning, <sup>14</sup> it should be acknowledged that the headless monster of Bataille and Masson no doubt finds at least some of its provenance in the writings and ideas of Bataille's colleague, Roger Caillois.

As is well known, Caillois' essay *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, originally published in *Minotaur* in 1935, has had a surprising influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century thought, not the least being that it was partly responsible for Jacques Lacan's development of the idea of the ‘mirror stage.’ This more famous essay was a development of an earlier essay devoted to a discussion of the praying mantis as the supreme representative of what Caillois called ‘objective ideograms,’ published the year before. For Caillois, the predatory sexual activities of the mantis were evidence of the ‘over-determination’ of the universe: that interconnected causal chains of affective influence stretched from even the mineral and insectoid worlds into the psyche of humankind.

*[I]t is utterly unthinkable that causal series could be totally distinct. This also contradicts experience,*

*which constantly demonstrate their numerous intersections and sometimes supplies overwhelming, crushing expressions of their unfathomable solidarity. Although their meaning is hidden and ambiguous, such expressions never fail to reach their destination. In short, these are objective ideograms, which concretely realize the lyrical and passionate virtualities of the mind in the outside world.* <sup>15</sup>

The phrase “passional virtualities” is a clue as to the origin of Caillois' strange meditation on the interconnectedness of all things, and of the anthropomorphic resonances produced through the study of the mantis. Caillois had recently read Toussenel's *L'Esprit des bêtes, zoologie passionelle*, first published in 1853. Toussenel was a follower of Charles Fourier, the utopian socialist who proposed ingenious ways to reform industrial society based on ‘attractive labour’ – that is, industry based on the erotic predilections of individual workers. Clearly, this work on ‘passional zoology’ was not your average 19<sup>th</sup> century biological textbook.

Influenced by Toussenel's ideas, Caillois sought to demonstrate the “existence of a certain kind of lyrical objectivity,” a continuity of affect, which could be para-scientifically illustrated by, and condensed into, a single figure – in this case, the praying mantis in its various forms.

Caillois' attempts to demonstrate the “systematic over-determination of the universe” and his exhaustive description of the mantis, the objective ideogramme of the “continuity between nature and the mind,” would without doubt have been a latent presence in the minds of both Bataille and Masson. I suggest that the defining attribute of the *Acéphale* group's emblem, namely, that it is headless, is an effect produced by Caillois' essay – one might even say an *over-determination* produced by Caillois' mantis. The sexual cannibalism of the female mantis is discussed

at length by Caillois. The fact that the female mantis chews the head off the male while engaged in coitus is something that, as Caillois avers, one can never really forget.

It is obviously impossible to ‘prove’ that the idea of mantic decapitation was in part responsible for the production of Masson's emblem, but if one provisionally entertains Caillois' proposal of the continuity between nature and psyche, and of the consequent complexification of casual chains, then I do not consider this an untenable proposition. It has, at the very least, an *imaginal logic*, as I have suggested earlier. For my purposes this imaginal logic can be pursued further with one more step.

In his essay Caillois mentions various folk names for the mantis such as “Pray-to-God” and “Pray-to-the-Devil.” At one point he mentions that the predatory sexuality of the mantis could be “correlated with the medieval concepts of the *incubi* and *succubi*.” <sup>16</sup> In a further note he suggests that the mantis ideogram can be observed operating in Bodin's *De la Demomanie des sorciers* of 1580 and “other demonographers of the period.” Yet oddly enough, despite Caillois' synoptic studies of the mantis both entomological and etymological, he neglects to mention probably the most interesting etymological curiosity associated with the insect.

The word ‘mantis’ comes from an ancient Greek word that has the meaning of ‘seer’ or ‘prophet, diviner’ (*μαντικός*). It's Proto-Indo-European root form is the origin of our *mania*, a person inspired by a ‘divine frenzy,’ one who is *ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ μαινεται*, “possessed by a god,” as Herodotus says in his *Histories* (Book 4, 79). Caillois could easily have made this observation when he mentions Bodin's *Demomanie*, as the ‘demonomania’ in the title clearly shows this ancient connexion. Yet he does not, so this is where I come in.

I have noted the idea of demonological possession in relation to Bataille's conception of the *Acéphale* and the ancient magical text, the *Stele of Jeu the Hieroglyphist* earlier in this essay. Capitalising on the etymological/imaginal connexions between the mantis and demonomania, I will now invoke my final image.

In 1307 King Philip the Fair ordered that his once-trusted Crusaders, the Knights Templar, all be arrested and interrogated about their activities in the Holy Land and elsewhere. The Templars were tortured, tried and condemned, and many of their number summarily executed. Following the trials, Philip arrogated the considerable wealth of the Templars to his own fortunes. Considering that the confessions of the knights were all extracted under torture, Philip's epithet must now be regarded as perversely ironic (of course, the epithet 'fair' [*le beau*] was in reference to his appearance, not his character. Yet it is still true that even in his own time, he was regarded as a particularly unfair monarch.)

Among the list of wrong doings of which the Knights Templar were accused was the charge of idolatry. Specifically they were charged with worshiping an idol in the form of a decapitated head. This bearded head was called *Baphomet*, and it was supposedly kept secreted somewhere within the Knights' temple in Paris. There has been considerable debate as to the nature of this head. Was it a sculptured head? A mummified head? Or perhaps it was a reliquary containing a human skull, like that of the hand of St. John the Baptist that now resides in the *Topkapı Sarayı* in Istanbul?

And what did the name *Baphomet* mean? It has been assumed that this was a corruption of *Mahomet* (Mohammed), but no one is really sure. What is certain is that these infamous trials of the Templars, and this mysterious head, the Baphomet, inspired two outré cultural activities both of which have inspired this last

section of my essay. The first is that the often contradictory descriptions of the Baphomet led to the creation of a special kind of gargoyle in France, also called Baphomet: a bearded, horned, winged androgynous demon, which can even now be found on the portals of several cathedrals in France. In Italy a figure called *bafometto* can be found in a grotto in Padua, the *Grotta dei Cavalieri Templari*.<sup>17</sup>

The second outré activity that was inspired by the Templars and their Baphomet was the creation, many centuries later, of esoteric societies that imagined themselves as heirs to the mysteries and secret rites of the Templars.

These two eccentric streams are the background to the production of probably the best known re-imagining of the image of the Baphomet: Eliphas Levi's (Alphonse Louis Constant) drawing of the 'Goat of Mendes' in his *Dogma et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, published in 1854. Possessing the attributes of the baphometric gargoyles, and symbolising the secrets and rites of the European occult tradition, Levi's description and defense of this figure aims to rescue it from associations with the demonic and, indeed, the satanic.

Levi states that the Baphomet, "a chimera, a malformed sphinx, a synthesis of deformities" symbolises the 'astral fire,' the 'Great Magical Agent,' the 'odic force' and the "devil of M. Eudes de Mirville," this latter a reference to the now forgotten author of *Pneumatologie: Des esprits et de leurs manifestations fluidiques*, published a few years before Levi's magnum opus. Levi asserts that "the frontispiece to this *Rituel* reproduces the exact figure of the terrible emperor of night, with all his attributes and all his characters," this benighted emperor being none other than the "Baphomet of the Templars, the bearded idol of the alchemist, the obscene deity of Mendes, the goat of the Sabbath." He furthermore announces, "let us state

boldly and precisely that all inferior initiates of the occult science and profaners of the Great Arcanum, not only did in the past but do now, and will ever, adore what is signified by this alarming symbol."

*The Grand Masters of the Order of the Templars worshipped the Baphomet, and caused it to be worshipped by their initiates; yes, there existed in the past and there may be still in the present, assemblies which are presided over by this figure.. for them it is that of the god Pan, the god of our modern schools of philosophy, the god of the Alexandrian theurgic school and of our own mystical Neo-platonists..the god of Spinoza and Plato, the god of the primitive Gnostic schools; the Christ also of the dissident priesthood.*<sup>18</sup>

Clearly it is Levi's aim to make of his Baphomet the ultimate hieroglyphic emblem, the supreme condensation of all the great mysteries of the occult tradition. The gesture of Levi's Baphomet, one arm pointing aloft, the other to the earth, is (evidently) the "the sign of occultism." Levi says that one of the arms is feminine and the other masculine to represent the mystical androgyne, and that these attributes have been "combined with those of our goat, since they are one and the same symbol." Here we have the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the resolution of antimonies, beloved of mystics and occultists alike.

Levi's attempt to make of the Baphomet the ultimate emblem of all occult secrets, rather than a decapitated head that was an object of worship by the Templars, has received support from a contemporary scholar of Templar lore, Bernard Marillier, in his *Essai sur la Symbolique Templière*.<sup>19</sup> Marillier asserts that the Baphomet was a symbol of the "rite of the severed head," which is the "source of all the myths that relate to the primordial Tradition."<sup>20</sup>

Marillier adumbrates a list of related stories from world mythology that serve to support his theory: the head of the Medusa severed by Perseus, the heads which the Celts took from their slain enemies, various incidents of decapitation in the Grail cycle of stories, etc. All these point, he says, to a 'mythico-initiatic' tradition to which the Knights Templar were heirs.

*The rite of decapitation is linked to a double initiation: by cutting off the head of an enemy – the initiate as conqueror – the neophyte receives both the mana contained in the head and spiritual power, and abandons his envelope of flesh for the Spirit.*<sup>21</sup>

According to Marillier the Baphomet was not an idol at all, rather it was the hieratic emblem of "an initiation rite of the heroic-solar type":

*For the rite of symbolic decapitation, the Templars.. captured the spirit and spiritual power, aligned themselves with the divine, and prepared to defeat both their visible and invisible enemies, the most formidable of which reside in the very depths of their being.*<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore,

*The neophyte, by reciting formulas and participating in dramatized scenes, identifies with the deity, allowing him to make his spiritual rebirth in intimate communion with the divine.* (My italics.)<sup>23</sup>

In Marillier's interpretation of the Baphomet, the 'divine frenzy' – the mantic sublimation – is the summit of the 'mythico-initiatic' tradition which the Templars had brought from the East, and of which the Baphomet was the mysterious, ultimate emblem. Regarded in this manner, the Baphomet appears as the secret twin of, and the necessary occult complement to, the headless monster of Bataille and Masson.

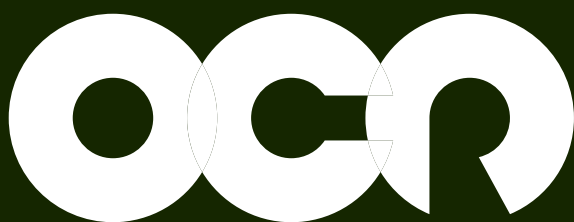
The foregoing considerations of an emblematic head and a headless emblem, of esoteric traditions and an occult synthesis of deformities, leads me inevitably to contemplate the creation of a new hieroglyph, to produce, in effect, the alchemical resolution of this strange iconography – *solve et coagula*, as Levi's idol impels. I propose therefore a synthesis of the obscurities presented by an analysis of these figures, to unite the *Acéphale* and the Baphomet in a form of *chymical marriage*: the Baphomet Restored.

I offer, then, my own hieratic emblem, my own 'synthesis of deformities': Levi's 'Goat of Mendes' seated upon a half sphere. Its left hand is now transformed into the hooked arm of the praying mantis, and points to a black moon below. Its right arm is similarly transformed into the supplicative gesture of the insect, and points to a silver moon surrounded by dark clouds above. The black wings behind the creature are now clearly the appendages of a monstrous insect, its chitinous wing covers clearly visible behind the luminous wings themselves. Its body is still androgynous: a phallus in the form of the mercurial caduceus, a woman's breasts high on its chest. But its head! Now it is far more frightening: we see the glaring, inquisitive, multi-faceted eyes of the praying mantis; quivering antennae in place of goat horns, chattering mandibles instead of a goat's snout.

The torch of illumination still burns between its antennae, and the emblem is now transfigured into its final form. ■

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. By which I mean a sorcerous *fascinans* – to be entranced and captured by an illusory appearance.
2. Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg, eds., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 12.
3. My translation of: *Il est temps d'abandonner le monde des civilisés et sa lumière. Il est trop tard pour tenir à être raisonnable et instruit – ce qui a mené à une vie sans at-trait. Secrètement ou non, il est nécessaire de devenir tout autres ou de cesser d'être.*
4. Georges Bataille, in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 14.
5. Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), xlii.
6. See the *Introduction* to Maria de Naglowska, *The Light of Sex: Initiation, Magic and Sacrament*, trans. Donald Traxler (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2011).
7. Refer to Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg, eds., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 14-15.
8. Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 103.
9. McGregor Mathers, hierophant of the late 19th century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, translated the daemon of this text – inexplicably – as the 'bornless' one, a reference found in the title of this essay.
10. Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 103.
11. Georges Bataille in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, 14.
12. Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *The Golden Game, Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 13.
13. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1988), 22.
14. The phrase is Caillois'. I have stolen it for reasons that I hope will soon become clear.
15. Roger Caillois, "The Praying Mantis," in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 80.
16. *Ibid.*, 75.
17. In point of fact the transcripts of the confessions of the Templars do not confirm that they referred to their mysterious idol by the name of Baphomet, rather one of the Templars, Gaucerant de Montpezat, refers to a 'tête baphométrique' (a baphometric head), the meaning of which adjective has eluded scholars ever since.
18. Eliphas Levi, *Transcendental Magic*, trans. A. E. Waite (London: Rider & Company, 1968), 307.
19. Bernard Marillier, *Essai sur la Symbolique Templière* (Editions Prades, n.d.). excerpts accessed at <http://www.templiers.net/symbolique/index.php?page=le-baphomet-bernard-marillier> (accessed August 21, 2013).
20. The 'Tradition' in this case being the 'perennial tradition' espoused by such 20th century esotericists as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr for example.
21. Bernard Marillier, *Essai sur la Symbolique Templière*. "Le rite de la décollation est lié à une double initiation : en sectionnant le chef d'un ennemi – initiateur, le vainqueur – néophyte captait à la fois le mana contenu dans la tête et sa puissance spirituelle, et abandonnait son enveloppe de chair à l'Esprit."
22. *Ibid.* "Par le rite de la décapitation symbolique, les Templiers...captèrent l'esprit et la puissance spirituelle, se met-taient en phase avec le divin, et se préparaient à vaincre à la fois leurs ennemis visibles et invisibles, ceux qui gîtent au tréfonds de l'être, les plus redoutables."
23. *Ibid.* "Le néophyte, par la récitation de formules et le jeu de scènes dramatisées, s'identifiait à la divinité, lui permettant d'opérer sa renaissance spirituelle en intime communion avec le divin."



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